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Lapland's Dark Heritage: Responses to the Legacy of World War II

Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and Suzie Thomas

Abstract

'Dark,' or 'difficult' heritage is increasingly becoming of interest to researchers. How do different communities, whether in situ, online, or united by a particular hobby or interest, relate to aspects about the past that may be difficult or painful to reconcile? Do these encounters with difficult heritage lead to exploitation, indifference, destruction, or other even more diverse responses? This chapter focuses on communities in far northern Finland where different groups have chosen to engage (or not to engage) with the physical remains left by German activity in Lapland during the Second World War. These groups, including tourists, local residents and hobbyist treasure hunters, respond differently to the 'dark' heritage generated and in so doing generate their own connections and reconnections with the past.

Keywords

Dark heritage, dark tourism, difficult heritage, Second World War, Lapland, Finland.

Introduction: Dark heritage in context

In this chapter, we explore the concept of heritage as a potentially 'dark' force, that is, we discuss how the more dark, macabre and even painful elements of heritage can be singled out for engagement with by different groups and individuals. We focus here on aspects of the past, and of concepts of the past in the present time, that become celebrated, commemorated, collected, or otherwise consumed because of their 'darker' qualities. However this 'darkness' may sometimes also be incidental to the primary 'value' of the heritage, which may come from other aspects such as the geographical or temporal proximity between those who engage with heritage and the historical events to which it relates. In our case study, we look at the dark heritage legacy of the Second World War (WWII), as it is understood and regarded within the region of Lapland in northern Finland. Lapland is the northernmost region of Finland, with the city of Rovaniemi as its administrative capital (Figure 1). 'Lapland' is also the name sometimes used in English to refer to Sápmi, the cultural region in the northernmost areas of Norway, Sweden, Finland and northeastern Russia. For the purposes of this chapter however, we will use the term Lapland to refer specifically to the Finnish region of that name.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

As a site of tourism, Lapland is traditionally associated with wilderness, and increasingly with 'magical' experiences such as Christmas-related tourism, as in the case of Rovaniemi's Santa Claus Village attraction (Herva 2014, p.298). These impressions of Finland's Lapland region persist, although as we discuss below, there is also an interest in WWII heritage, which is not limited only to visiting tourists.

Before exploring the dark WWII heritage of Lapland further, we first outline some of the literature and research to date concerning dark tourism and dark heritage, contextualizing it also with the concept of contested heritage and contested landscapes. The idea of 'dark' heritage, and particularly

'dark' tourism appears to have originated with Malcolm Foley and J. John Lennon (1996, p. 195) as a means of recognizing the process of visiting, primarily as tourists, heritage sites connected with atrocity "for remembrance, education or entertainment". Influenced by these and other scholars, Stone (2006) developed a 'spectrum' of dark tourism, in which individual attractions may exhibit different degrees of 'darkness'. Factors affecting the extent to which a tourist attraction is dark may include such variables as authenticity (a site where a traumatic event occurred is 'darker' than an exhibition about the event that is situated elsewhere), and the extent to which the attraction has been commoditized for touristic consumption. The darkest sites are those that have the least tourism infrastructure and the worst atrocities associated with them. They are also situated in the actual place where the dark event (or events) took place – death camps are feasibly therefore the darkest of these sites (Stone 2006, p. 157).

There is now a wealth of literature debating and problematizing dark tourism, but it is important to acknowledge that 'dark' sites have more than just a touristic value. Heritage generally is understood as more than a resource for generating tourism, and can have multiple meanings to different communities. Acknowledging that 'community' itself should not be regarded as a catch-all term based on uncritical assumptions and practices (Watson and Waterton 2010, p.1), we can move on to suggest that multiple communities of interest and of practice can exist, perhaps connected by a particular interest in history, by where they live, by ethnicity, or online as digital communities – themselves representing a range of different types of engagement (Rosenbaum and Schachaf 2010). Furthermore, these different communities may represent quite different sets of opinions perspectives and values to those of the cultural heritage professionals. As Waterton (2005, p. 310) has noted, 'landscape' as a concept "oscillates between the dominance of aesthetic and scientific values within heritage protection, and an understanding that invariably draws in intangible associations such as identity social history and a sense of place, thus providing an important focus for local communities".

Although in Waterton's case she was discussing community values within English archeological heritage in the landscape, which is not necessarily specifically 'dark', her point stands that local communities likely use cultural landscapes in a different way to heritage professionals, linking in intangible, often very personal, ontologies. Our approach also draws on Schofield's (2005, p.15) characterization of what he terms 'combat archeology', by "recognizing the multiplicity of views and interpretations, but recognizing the relevance and validity of all", including those that are significantly at variance with official and 'professional' cultural heritage interpretation approaches. Heritage of war can be seen therefore as a result of agency, contingency, politics, power and resistance. Gegner and Ziino (2012, p.2) also underline the importance of acknowledging the agency of people and communities who do the work of making the meanings from the past. According to them, "[h]eritage is constituted in the act of identifying what is appropriate to remember and preserve in the light of experience".

The case study we present in this chapter, and to which we next turn, essentially draws upon elements from dark tourism and dark heritage studies. We first provide some historical background to the German materiel heritage in Lapland, before moving on to examples of contemporary engagement with this heritage. Other scholars have discussed the impact of war on personal lives, for example of children, (e.g. Korppi-Tommola 2008), and the legacy of traumatic events in the form of memory (e.g. Sääskilahti 2013). Hence, we focus on the legacy of the events of WWII in Lapland in

terms of cultural heritage and interactions therewith, including a proposed 'continuum' of different actor types. We suggest that this continuum can help establish the different ways in which both groups and individuals appear to engage with the WWII heritage in Lapland, particularly that which is connected to the German presence.

German WWII involvement in Finland

Like much of Europe, Finland was not spared from involvement in WWII. Finland was a small, and to begin with neutral, nation located between the two superpowers of the Soviet Union and the Third Reich. After the Finnish-Soviet 'Winter War' (1939–40), Finns believed that a new conflict with the Soviet Union was only a matter of time. After negotiations with Sweden to develop a defense pact intended to deter the Soviet Union failed to reach an agreement, Finland found itself "entirely without military support in the autumn of 1939 when Hitler and Stalin in collusion began their simplification of the political map of eastern and northern Europe" (Meinander 2011, p. 136). However, since the early twentieth century Finland had had a close relationship with Germany, and as part of Hitler's Operation Barbarossa – the attack on the Soviet Union – German troops began arriving in Finland (Seitsonen and Herva 2011, p. 173). Some 200,000 German troops were based in Finland, mostly in the northern parts of the country. The German presence in Lapland from the end of 1940, under Eduard Dietl, was relatively harmonious with the local community until the change in relationship between the Soviet Union necessitated hostilities. Finland declared war with Germany from October 1944 as part of the condition of peace with the Soviet Union (Korppi-Tommola 2008, p. 445). Consequently, towards the end of WWII, Finns turned against their former German brothers-in-arms. However, the two former allies at first merely pretended to be at war, although this escalated eventually into actual war and large-scale devastation of northern Finland (Tuominen 2005). As Sääskilahti noted (2013), the scale of destruction by the German army adopting 'scorched earth' tactics, along with the necessary mass evacuation of the Lapland residents, left traumatic and painful memories for many.

The complicated Finnish-German relationship during the war resulted in a controversial and contradictory perception of the German military presence in Finland. As Herva (2014) commented:

> On the one hand, there is the perception of 'good Germans' who provided Finland with much needed help in a difficult time. On the other hand, there is the embarrassment that Finland sided with Nazis who furthermore ended up 'burning down Lapland'. Finns have been anxious to distance themselves from the German war efforts ever since the war. (p. 300)

The situating of Finland between Axis and Allies during WWII resulted in conflicting opinions and experiences for those attempting to come to terms with the events of the war. Others have noted the difficulty of some Finns in acknowledging their close alliance with Nazi Germany (e.g. Herva 2014), while there are also relatively fond recollections of interactions with the German soldiers. This is illustrated particularly well in the recent exhibition "*Wir waren Freunde* / *Olimme ystäviä*" (in English "We were friends") at the Provincial Museum of Lapland in Arktikum, Rovaniemi, running from April 2015 to January 2016 (discussed below, and see also Alariesto et al 2015). The question of

Finnish-German relations has remained a sensitive topic for a long time and has only recently become critically reassessed (e.g. Westerlund 2008).

WWII German sites and materiel in Lapland

Schofield (2005, p. 117) has suggested that WWII "added one million sites to the UK's archaeological resources", and so it is the case in northern Finland that the landscape is awash with sites and material culture from WWII. Examples range from buildings that still stand and are still in use (such as the 'Mansion of Kaleva' in Oulu – originally a Waffen-SS Officers' Club but deliberately renamed to disassociate the building from its Nazi past – see Ylimaunu et al 2013, pp. 10-11; Herva 2014, pp. 300-301), through remains of Prisoner of War (PoW) camps, through to scattered material culture such as remains of tanks and other military vehicles. The majority of Lapland's wartime German sites were completely destroyed and burned down. Thus the physical remains are mainly war junk or ruins. In the post-war years, people of Lapland who returned to the sites of their destroyed homes used much of the remaining war junk for building new homes. In the beginning, people had to stay in temporary shelters such as "holes in the ground, cardboard shacks or old barracks" (Tuominen 2005, p. 154). Reconstruction was important and proceeded fast despite the extreme lack of materials and resources. While the infrastructure and dwellings were rebuilt, the remains of German military base and prison camps were mainly left untouched. Many of the people we have interviewed in Lapland who are interested in the cultural heritage of WWII today told us how they as children played with war junk, even especially explosives, despite their parents' warnings. Today, the WWII German sites – some of which are located right next to (or upon) tourist attractions like in the case of Rovaniemi's Santa Claus Village (Mullins 2014; Forrest 2015) – are mostly ignored by many local people although there are still visible elements in the landscape. None of these sites have any signage or have received any kind of official status as cultural heritage.

Additional to the remains in the landscape, there are numerous examples of individuals with personal memorabilia and stories about German sites. There is also commemorative cultural heritage in the form of monuments and exhibitions (such as the Norvajärvi cemetery for fallen German soldiers – the only official monument in Rovaniemi commemorating the Germans in WWII – and the collections held and interpreted within museums). WWII military history and materiel has also been exhibited in numerous smaller tourist destinations. In Inari, local history hobbyists who we have interviewed have collected some military equipment such as a tank and some artillery from the area and placed them on public spots as unofficial monuments (see also the blog Sovintovaara: http://sovintovaara.blogspot.fi). Members of our research team have also observed WWII materiel found from the ground being used as decoration at local camping sites such as Muotkan Ruoktu and Kielajoki (Giellajohka).

It has been claimed that, compared to the Winter and Continuation Wars, the Lapland War occupies only a "marginal" place in Finland's collective memory of WWII (Kivimäki 2012, p. 483). However, as we discuss below, certainly at a local level, the legacy of Lapland's WWII experiences and history are still seen and even felt among different groups of people who are somehow engaged with the heritage of WWII.

Encounters and engagement with Lapland's dark heritage – a continuum of interests

Who is attracted by the dark heritage of wartime Lapland? From the basis of interviews and encounters with the official heritage agents (museum professionals) and hobbyists, we speculate a sort of 'continuum' of different types of people interested in the German material of Lapland War (Figure 2). We identified the key 'categories' as expert-guides, expert-activists, expert-explorers (including metal detectorists), collectors (including expert-collectors), and – most broadly – history hobbyists. The actors in these categories differ from official or authorized persons who follow agendas set by institutions and organizations, and instead participate and act in the heritage scene according their own personal motivations and interests. We are interested in the *active agents* who, rather than participating in events and activities organized by others, take part in actions such as conserving, documenting, mapping, and collecting WWII material culture. Some hobbyists are also volunteers who offer un-coerced help (either formally or informally) with no token pay, for the benefit of the common good (cf. Stebbins 1996), in this case heritage work. Some individuals fall into more than one category, and we see the boundaries between our different categories as porous.

(Insert Figure 2 here)

In our research we have carried out interviews with museum professionals, as well as history hobbyists (some whom are also collectors), and members of groups involved in searching activities related to repatriation of fallen soldiers – involving documentary research and metal detecting. These groups mainly act through groups and societies (e.g. Lapland's Association for Cherishing the Memory of the Dead of the War; Lapland's Society of Military History), although individual, lone activity is not uncommon. All interviewees consented to their interviews being recorded and to the information they gave us being used in our analyses and in the dissemination of our research. We have taken care not to name any of our informants. All of the people we have interviewed were aware of the potential of dark heritage and dark tourism, but also of the sensitivity of the topic. They do not wish to hide any of the cruel sides of WWII heritage but rather to acknowledge it as part of local history. In other words, our impression was that our informants were aware of the darkness of the heritage in question, but the attraction to interact with this heritage was founded upon other aspects – for example its local relevance and the relative ease with which material heritage connected to this period can still be discovered in the landscape – *in addition* to its status as dark heritage.

In the case of Rovaniemi, there are several different actors who document and preserve WWII history. Official or 'authorized' actors, to borrow from Smith and Waterton (2009) and others, include the Provincial Museum of Lapland at Arktikum. The museum's collection and documentation policies include accessioning and preserving items and recollections of the Lapland War. The municipal library also has a large collection of literature related to the Lapland War. These official agents co-operate with the history hobbyists. One group of these WWII hobbyists, themselves heritage agents, are the local *expert-guides*; those who have studied the history of the area and actively guide and help others interested in military history. These expert-guides have often had a long-lasting relationship to the area which is either their home region or has become their home. Therefore they are motivated by emotional and/or ideological drivers. The Provincial Museum of Lapland cooperates with a man who is dedicated to mapping and documenting the ruins of German sites in Rovaniemi's landscape. This man, who has training in both history and archeology, bikes

thousands of kilometers a year visiting sites, studies documents, interviews elderly people and draws detailed maps of the areas (Forrest 2015). Other expert-guides include a former military officer who is interested in local military history and especially Germans. Together with the local Rotary organization, he cares for the Norvajärvi German cemetery and guides German visitors, some of whom come there to see the grave site of their loved ones who died in WWII. The cemetery is also popular among Finnish tourists, who often go there in groups. A visit to the cemetery is part of a WWII themed bus tour entitled "Cape of Chimneys" (*Piippuniemi*) created by two local professional guides specialized in local war history. Thus, Rovaniemi feeds/attracts some degree of dark tourism which is linked to tragedies such as death sites and battlefields. The paid nature of some of the expert-guide activities, such as the tour bus organizers, also indicates the fluidity between this category and other official or authorized heritage interpreters such as the museum, which also gain an official status from their professional nature.

Our fieldwork in smaller villages of Lapland, where there are only a few if any official heritage agents dedicated to cultivating WWII legacy, feature local hobbyist *expert-activists*, who educate other local people about the importance of preserving local sites. An example of this is a woman who moved at the age of 15 to the small village of Vuotso in Sodankylä, where the German army used to have a *Rasthaus* (a place to rest), and also an airport. Soon after moving to Vuotso, this woman became interested in WWII history and started documenting sites and raising awareness locally about the heritage, for example encouraging them to make use of it in tourism businesses.

We have also encountered a different type of 'expert', which we call *expert-explorers*, whose activities include studying and documenting WWII battlefields, prison camps, crash sites, and so forth. Many of these expert-explorers belong to groups or societies who organize journeys in order to explore certain sites of particular interest. Their repertoire of activities includes documenting the site, taking photographs and marking down the place on a map. Museum professionals working in the two main Finnish aviation museums, situated in Vantaa (in the Greater Helsinki region) and Tikkakoski (on the outskirts of Jyväskylä in Central Finland), informed us of one particular type of expert-explorer group. These groups are called wreck or crash site explorers and they have existed since the late 1970s when their first expeditions in Finnish Lapland took place (see Valtonen 2009). Many of the groups and individual explorers collaborate with the museums, providing the information about crash sites, their location and the current condition of the remains. Other examples of expert-explorers include members of fallen soldier repatriation groups which cooperate with the Finnish police and Army on the basis of legislation and formal agreements between the states of Germany and Russia. In Finland, these activities were initially coordinated by the Ministry of Education and from 1998 onwards by the Association for Cherishing the Memory of the Dead of the War (*Sotavainajien muiston vaalimisyhdistys* in Finnish, see www.sotavainajat.net). Most expert-exploring seems to be systematic and includes studying of military documents and use of technical equipment such as Global Positioning Systems and/or metal detectors.

Expert-explorers share a mutual interest not only of history and archeology but also of nature, trekking and wilderness, and therefore the attraction to dark heritage is only one part of their motivation. Repatriation is also motivated by patriotic thinking and gratefulness to the Finnish veterans who gave their lives for the nation. As one of our interviewees put it, participating in the repatriation activities is about "paying back the honorary debt". Cooperating with and helping other

nations' repatriation groups seems to go hand in hand with the respectful attitude towards all fallen soldiers.

A special case among the expert-explorers is the *metal detectorist*, who visits and explores the sites in search of valuable findings. These metal detectorists, operate in a gray zone between licit and illicit activity, and some of their actions, for example if they were digging on sites protected under the Antiquities Act (National Board of Antiquities 2014) would be illegal. Metal detectorists operate both individually and in active small groups, and in Finland seem to be mostly men in their 30s and 40s. Some foreign metal detectorists have visited Lapland in search of certain German military equipment which is highly valued among collectors of WWII militaria. While we have yet to explore in depth the degree to which these groups are organized, parallels in other countries (such as the UK – e.g. Thomas 2012, and Denmark – e.g. Dobat 2013) suggest that metal detectorist groups can be fairly structured, with online forums, planned group meetings and other activities, and even a paid membership through which to obtain and maintain affiliation.

Some of the expert-explorers and detectorists are also *collectors* who study (local) military history and collect objects from antiques markets and other sources, as well as adding to their collections by discovering artefacts in the surrounding area from their explorer activities. These exploring collectors, who also exchange information and trade objects with other collectors, might also be called *expert-collectors* because of their vast knowledge and expertise. The collector category also includes individuals who are not engaged in expert-explorer activities, and therefore this is another category in which there is overlap on the continuum.

German WWII material is among the most desirable – and therefore of the most financially valuable – WWII related objects around the world, with Carr, for example, noting that collectors of German militaria in the Channel Islands regard their collections as 'nest eggs' due to their increasing market value (2014, pp. 47-48). According to one of the collectors that we interviewed, this is because of the 'darkness' of this material, and the curiosity of collectors and others about this darkness. Some Finnish collectors specialize in certain German related objects, or in local groups such as volunteer Finnish SS men who fought in Hitler's army. The same collector mentioned above told us that he has received many of his objects directly from these Finnish SS veterans or their families. Objects can also be found online or from militaria fares. We also saw evidence of shop sales of WWII militaria in local centers of commerce such as Rovaniemi, as shown in Figure 3. In this case the objects we saw on sale used to belong to a collector who had died and whose family had decided to sell their collection.

(Insert Figure 3 here)

In summing up this proposed continuum of experts, explorers and collectors, we have ultimately met *history hobbyists* whose activities are combine all or some of these fields. We therefore understand this category as at once all-encompassing of the other. For example, there are expert-explorer-collectors who only collect objects they have found from the ground themselves and (local) expert- explorer-activists who have explored local WWII sites and act to preserve them and make plans to create tourist activities at these sites which would thus benefit the local community and economy.

The Provincial Museum of Lapland and a box of matches

Before concluding the chapter, we want to emphasize that, despite our efforts to understand and identify the different ways in which those individuals and groups interested in WWII in Lapland choose to engage with the past, the relationship between contemporary residents in Lapland and the dark heritage of WWII remains complex and sometimes surprising. The following example, relating to a museum exhibition and planned promotional material, illustrates this point.

The exhibition "*Wir waren Freunde* / *Olimme ystäviä*", mentioned earlier, covers the experiences of both local residents and the German soldiers posted in Lapland from 1940-44, arranged thematically to cover topics such as the emergence of local bartering and black markets, romantic relationships between the soldiers and local women, and the proliferation of propaganda press in both Finnish and German languages for the local and German communities in Lapland. The exhibition even acknowledges the presence of PoW camps in Lapland, although this section of the exhibition is noticeably brief compared to others.

Interviews with the museum staff involved in the development of "*Wir waren Freunde*" indicate to us that the staff were very mindful, even at the earliest stages of planning, of the potential of the exhibition's subject to cause controversy and tensions. Staff apparently had lengthy discussions about how they themselves felt about the exhibition's content, as well as preparing themselves and their responses for the possibility of negative or inflammatory feedback from both the media and local residents. They speculated that some local residents might be uncomfortable with the idea of resurrecting the memory of the connection between Finland and Nazi Germany, in light of the many Nazi atrocities that came to light after the end of the war.

The exhibition itself has in fact received positive feedback from both media and museum visitors, as evidenced by the comments from a visitor exit survey (the official results of this are unpublished at the time of writing). However, the marketing material of the exhibition included the creation of matchboxes with the text "*Wir waren Freunde*"; the box colored black with the text itself in old-style red font (Figure 4). These matchboxes were launched in the previous fall (2014). They inspired sometimes strong reactions in local people. The director of the museum informed us that some days before the official opening of the exhibition in April 2015, the mayor of Rovaniemi had asked the museum to cease distributing the matchboxes. The banning of the matchboxes made national news (e.g. Räihä 2015; Vesa 2015). The matchboxes have been described by one journalist as "a cheeky reference to a rather hostile prank from the 1950s and 60s, when Finns would give matchboxes to German tourists and ask them if they'd prefer to light up a Marlboro or Lapland" (Forrest 2015). However, rather than the potential for interpreting the matchboxes themselves as in bad taste, those who objected to the matchboxes seem to have primarily criticized the *textual* message they might give to Germans. This was especially since the wording on the matchboxes announces that the friendship with them has ended (we "were", rather than "are", friends). In the view of many of the objectors, including some of the informants that we interviewed, the texts should have emphasized the restored and continuing good relations. The case of the matchboxes demonstrates that German alliance and presence in Lapland continues to be a sensitive issue in local cultural heritage politics.

(Insert Figure 4 here)

Final thoughts on Lapland's Dark Heritage

In this chapter we have sought to introduce the concept of dark heritage in relation to connected concepts such as dark tourism, and to present examples of the manifold ways in which encounters and engagements with this kind of heritage occur in the context of Finnish Lapland. The status of Lapland as a provider of dark tourism and heritage encounters runs contrary to other perceptions of the region, for example its association with Santa Claus and nature-based adventure tourism – and it is arguable that in much of the official tourism marketing, notwithstanding coach tour packages such as *Piippuniemi*, the dark heritage has been silenced in favor of these other less contentious images. As discussed above however, the boundaries of interest are not always rigid, and some of our informant history hobbyists were also avid nature enthusiasts.

Focusing primarily on local actors rather than incoming tourists, we do see that there are intriguing communities of interest relating to the dark heritage of Lapland. We have suggested a continuum of different actors that engage with this dark heritage in a variety of, often related, ways. This model attempts to capture the balance between clear 'types' of interaction and motivation with the dark heritage, while also acknowledging the fluidity of these categories, with different actors potentially occupying more than one part of the continuum at any time. It remains to be seen whether these suggested terms for our actors cover the full gamut of engagements with the WWII cultural heritage in Lapland. Furthermore, analysis of communities in other regions with a 'dark' heritage provided by war or some other past catastrophe, will shed light on whether this particular continuum is unique to Lapland or represents categories which apply in all cases.

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